POST COLONIAL FEMINISM; A THEORITICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR DIVERSITY

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Abstract:
Postcolonial feminism is a large growing body of diverse and often conflicting formulations of the cultural production or writings and debates of oppressed people. This challenged the white feminist who has a universalising tendencies of feminist thought. The third world feminist analyses and examine the wide range of issues that women confront pertaining to their national context. In short, Heterogeneity is the key theme of the whole perspective for it works differently in different parts of the world. This paper tried to focus on postcolonial feminist theories and the idea and relevance of heterogeneity in postcolonial feminist studies. This strand of feminism imagines a world where ‘differences are enjoyed and celebrated’.

Keywords: colonialism, post colonialism, postcolonial feminism, heterogeneity

INTRODUCTION

Before going deeper into concerns of post-colonial feminism, it is important to have a brief understanding of post-colonial theory. Postcolonialism emerged as a critical perspective of understanding colonialism as an ideological baggage that can be successfully contested by traditions of knowledge which have developed outside the west. Post-colonial theory developed, from the work of the colonial discourse theorist Edward Said, particularly in his book Orientalism (1978). Said analysed the way that Europe in the nineteenth century represented many of the cultures with which it came into contact through imperial expansion; he argued that the West produced these other cultures as an ‘Other’ to a Western norm. Travellers and scholars represented these other cultures as not only different from British culture, but also as negatively different. Thus, for Said, other peoples were described as lazy, degenerate, uncivilised, barbaric as Other to the civilised, hard-working British. It is concerned to analyse and theorise the enduring impact of nineteenth-century European colonialism, both in those countries, such as India and Africa, which were colonised and in those, such as Britain and France, which colonised. Post-colonial theory has developed in the last ten years, building on Said's work and reacting to some of its globalising tendencies. Thus, postcolonialism has come to provide a completely new and critical perspective of understanding colonialism. It has also sparked of very major controversies. It questions the very sanctity of corpus of knowledge based on reason and science which developed in legacy of Enlightenment. The language of post colonialism seems quite impenetrable, for it have been highly eclectic. Thus defined, postcoloniality is released from the fixity of location and history of colonization and is identified with discourse. Postcolonial theory is thus a critical study of colonial texts, both literary and non-literary. Postcoloniality articulates its theories alongside economic, social, cultural and historical factors. In practice, it works differently in different parts of the world. For instance, it conveys patriarchy as a relationship of inequality that is highly variable because it is to be considered always along with the other social structures.

Post-colonial feminist theory is not a unified group. They find parallels between colonialism and subjugation of women. They are said to be feminist who have responded to both the universalizing tendencies within Western feminist thinking and the lack of attention paid to gender issues in mainstream post-colonial theory. In her article ‘post-colonial feminist theory’ Sara Mills argues, “it has brought about a ‘worlding’ of mainstream feminist theory; feminist theory has moved from a rather parochial concern with white, middle-class English-speaking women, to a focus on women in different national and cultural contexts”’. Western feminist has a belief that every woman should be same as men and the asserts for sameness and solidarity of women. They did not examine the nuances and ambiguities of other cultures. Postcolonial feminists object to the idea of the commonality and universality of women’s lives, since these were generally based on the universalization of western women’s experiences, and wanted their own voices to be heard. There was a belief associated with imperial colonialization that westerners were superior and the colonized were inferior races and, therefore, had to be civilized. But through the lens of colonialism, post-colonial feminist is able to explore a lot of issues of woman relating to subordination, such as migration, slavery, representation, suppression and resistance, rather than treating gender in a simplistic sense. Postcolonial feminism has thus opened up areas and topics for academic studies and research that provide a more nuanced picture of women’s lives from around the world. These feminist theories provide the analytic tools to address issues of structural inequities in groups that historically have been socially and economically disadvantaged through the creation of an intellectual discourse which can adequately reflect the struggle of women outside the western world. Postcolonial feminism is sometimes also called third world feminism. Some feminist prefers this term ‘third world feminism’ instead of postcolonial feminism for precision and context. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park “Postcolonial feminism cannot be regarded simply as a subset of postcolonial studies, or, alternatively, as another variety of feminism. Rather it is an intervention that is changing the configurations of both postcolonial and feminist studies. Postcolonial feminism is an exploration of and at the intersections of colonialism and neo-colonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in the different contexts of women’s lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights”

POST COLONIAL FEMINIST CONCERNS AND HETEROGENEITY

Post-colonial feminism or rather third world feminism is therefore indigenous to third world countries as the concerns and analyses of third world feminists are rooted in and responsive to the problem women face within their national contexts. By and
large, third world/postcolonial feminism questions, challenges and even contradicts western feminism. In accordance with their socio-cultural, economic, political conditions of different countries or regions, women’s movements may have different demands and voices. Also, it is possible to have similar concerns and points of commonality only within a specific socio-economic and political context. And for this, post colonialism was born out of the cultural critique of dominant, hegemonic powers. Academic discourses produced by writers of erstwhile colonized countries of the third world set the pace for this type of cultural criticism. These writings highlighted the ongoing resistance to colonialism. They undertook the study of cultural practices, extant and surviving, with a heightened emphasis on local and specific effects of colonialism and oppression. In short, postcolonial studies refer to a large and growing body of diverse and often conflicting formulations of the cultural production or writings and debates of oppressed people. Like feminist studies, it critiques the status quo. It is not a discipline or methodology as such, but rather a theoretical and cultural perspective. The exclusion and marginalized women of within national cultures is true of many countries which gained independence in the twentieth century. Exclusions based on race, gender and class may be culturally inherent. Women's ongoing fight for equality after independence reinforces the necessity and applicability of the postcolonial discourse. Postcolonial feminist theory analyses the relation between western women and indigenous women and argues that tendency to lump all women together and treat them as homogenously marginalised. Western feminism mainly focused and used their campaigning skill to advocate on gender inequalities and all conceptions of gender and patriarchal oppressions and claimed that they are ‘speaking for all women’. In “Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses”, Chandra Mohanty analyse specifically the production of the “Third World Woman” as a singular monolithic subject in some recent Western feminist texts”. In this academic essay, she challenges the notions of gender, sexual difference and patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross culturally. Mohanty critiques the representation of third world women as ‘silent’ colluding with her other and voicelessness. She discusses women ‘as a category of analysis’ and referring to the critical assumption that “all of us of the same gender across classes are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the analysis.” The homogeneity of women is not produced on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals”. She also mentions five specific ways in which women as a category of analysis used in Western feminist discourse on women in third world. This illustrates the construction of third world women as a homogenous “powerless” group often located as implicit victims of socio-economic oppression. Thus she laid the foundation stone for the critique of western feminism for having ignored cultural differences of women and became the main plank of postcolonial theorization. Mohanty is also sceptical about the monolithic and singular notion of patriarchy revealed by western feminist, which led to a reductive notion of a ‘third world difference’. The production of this homogenous concept is a way by which western feminist ‘appropriate’ and “colonize” the constitutive complexities which characterises the lives of women in these countries. This sweeps away the heterogeneity of lives of women in third world countries. Mohanty argues in favour of a feminist epistemology that incorporates the difference in the history, location of third world women. Mohanty in her writing, feminism without borders: decolonising theory, practicing solidarity and third world women and politics of feminism, disapproves the notion of Western feminism regarding all women as a homogeneous group without having any sense of difference pertaining to race, class, and circumstance. She vehemently opposes and brings into light various colonial tricks applied in the production of the third world women as a singular monolithic subject.

Another major question is on the voice which being heard and ‘who speaks for whom’ in discussions on women’s issues in post colonialism. Gayathri Chakraborty Spivak raises the question of voice and how western culture investigates other cultures in her most popular essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988). She explores possibilities to recover the long silenced voices of the subaltern women. She uses the example of sati practice of widow suicide as an example. Spivak underlines the importance of material histories and lives of third world women in understanding the heterogeneity of oppression and women’s struggles against it. Western feminists analyse women as a socially constituted homogeneous group across races, classes, and cultures. But women are also ‘material subjects of their history’. This means that women’s experiences are not just influenced by their gender but also by the specific contexts of the historical situations that they live in. Since these will vary across time periods and cultures, it would become impossible to speak of all women as having common experiences, problems or traits. This might label women as emotional and weak and the concept of women as ‘sisters in struggle’ might end up projecting third world women as powerless, exploited and sexually harassed, and in dire need of being rescued. Spivak proposes a counter strategy which imitates the negative stereotypical representations of women, the subaltern or the working class. She calls it ‘strategic essentialism’. Spivak major contribution to feminist debate of essentialism is in shifting the focus from the sexual difference to the reality of cultural difference between women of third world and that of first world.

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan has focused on the ‘image of Indian women’ in her analysis of representation of Indian women in colonial and post-colonial context. Rajan insist that the ways in which the post-colonial female subjectivity and feminity are inscribed reflects the debate over national identity. The native women are stereotyped as being without agency. But Rajan contends that it is possible to explore the historically victimised subject position of ‘native’ woman as a site for the ‘constitution of alternative subjectivities’. Rajan and Lata Mani have analysed the debate on sati played out by colonial discourse to locate female subjectivity in India. The debates and discussions around sati were prompted by concerns about bharmanical scriptures and interpretation of tradition; women were excluded from subject position and deprived of any agency in this discourse. The conservatives lauded sati as upholding Hindu tradition. The liberals and official discourse perceived women subjected to sati as a victim. Rajan in her 1993 essay, ‘the subject of Sati; pain and death in the contemporary discourse on sati’. In an attempt to assign active subject position to women in sati, Rajan calls the practice of sati-as-burning rather that sati-as-death.

White women tend to reduce ‘women of colour’ or ‘third world women’ to just one dimension of their lives and overlook their complex history, variety and subject position. In comparison to third world women, white women tend to perceive themselves as liberated subjects. Western feminism focus exclusively on gender discrimination, excluding other kinds of struggle, like ethnic struggle that have gender dimensions as well. The interest and experience of women from marginalised groups challenge this exclusionary approach of western feminism.
Thus, the main point of analysis and critique of western feminism which post-colonial feminism addresses is that they (western feminist) universalise and homogenise women’s issues and believe incorrectly that their texts represent women of the whole world. Post-colonial feminism is diverting from these homogenising ideas and a stood up for diversity, difference and heterogeneity of women’s lives. They imagine a world where ‘differences and entertained and enjoyed’. Postcolonial feminists argue for women emancipation that is subalternized by social, cultural, or economic structures across the world. Having an insight into differences, they wish for global liberation. Post-colonial feminists entertain and attempt the indigenization of both form and content. Undoubtedly, it is an initiative of postcolonial origin but not restricted to postcolonial vision of postcolonial origin. Heterogeneity is the key theme of postcolonial feminism. Postcolonial feminine writers are not interested in dismantling family order, custom, and tradition. They seek for balance, mutual respect and harmony.

Also, western feminism has tried to question and criticise every conception associated with gender including family and invited criticism of ‘questioning for the sake questioning’. For them, all these are secondary. As many post-colonial feminists have accepted and said that women in postcolonial settings at least in India want to rear family and family relations but not ‘at the behest of their counterparts’. They prefer balance and harmony maintaining all the feminine differences visible. Women’s role and status in the society are widely differing. Women belonging to well-off family think and play roles differently altogether. But in the core, women whether they are rich, poor, strong, weak, educated, illiterate, want to live with respect, name and as a partner. Compromise more or less is found playing active roles in women’s lives. Today women are right conscious enough and feel comparatively freer. So there is no doubt that to make the conditions of women better and to address her problems and find solutions, education is the best tool that we can make use of.

CONCLUSION

Post-colonial feminism as a cultural perspective coming from heterogeneous women of different places and challenges many claims of western feminism are finally able to create an impact among the main stream feminisms. Postcolonial feminists engage more and more domestic spaces of women’s lives. In their growth, they are able to put forward what was neglected for them due to the ‘worlding’ of western feminism - differences. As the women are different, their problems and solutions are different and may change from one place to another and need to be addressed and treated differently. These may range from dowry death to women as commodities. It is important to treat them as human beings and get her good education, make them aware of rights and to let them live a happy and peaceful life with her family in a society where is accepted as ‘she is’. In short, ‘postcolonial feminism’ provides corrective measures to mainstream ‘feminism’.

References